

Understanding class blogs as a tool for language development

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Web 2.0 has allowed for the development of cyber spaces where any computer user can create their own public pages to share knowledge, feelings and thoughts inviting linguistic interactions with people around the globe. This innovation has caught the attention of language practitioners who wish to experiment with blogging to enhance the teaching and learning experience. In 2007 I set up a class blog with my nine pre-intermediate EFL students in a language school in Brazil. This experience gave rise to two central questions: a) did my students see our blog as a learning tool? and b) what was blogging like in other language teaching contexts? To answer the first question I carried out some Exploratory Practice for three months. As for the second question, I designed an online survey which was answered by 16 members of a community of practice called the Webheads. Ultimately I learned that my students saw our blog as a learning tool and that blogs are being used in different ways around the world. This article presents the rationale behind using blogs in language classes, describes my research process and discusses the understanding my students and I have gained from exploring our own practices.

Keywords: blogs, Exploratory Practice, learning English as a foreign language, social interaction, Web 2.0

In 2007 I enrolled in an online workshop which showed how a group of language professionals called Webheads use technology in education. On contact with this group, I was referred to a multitude of Web pages on which students and teachers post texts, pictures, videos, sound and hyperlinks with a view to fostering interaction among its members and anyone else who feels like browsing through the materials. These user-friendly Web pages, known as blogs, seemed so motivating and interesting that I decided to create my own with a group of pre-intermediate teenage students at a language school where I taught general English in Rio de Janeiro – Brazil.

Inserting blogging in my teaching practice raised many puzzles. Along with the questions came a desire to learn more about the use of blogs worldwide. Therefore, to have a better understanding of my students' perceptions of the value of using blogs as part of their English learning, I decided to carry

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out some Exploratory Practice in my classroom. To learn more about blogs in other language classrooms, I prepared an online survey which was answered by 16 volunteer members of the Webheads.

This article presents the rationale behind the use of blogs in language learning, describes my search for understanding and discusses what my students and I have learned from this experience.

I Blogs and language learning

According to Bella (2005) 'a Weblog, also called a blog, is an easily created and updateable Website that allows people to publish to the Internet instantly' (n.p.) even if they do not have any knowledge of HTML programming. In its simplest form, as Bartlett-Bragg (2003) defines it, 'a blog consists in entries written by a single author and presented in reverse chronological order' (n.p.). These are often hyperlinked to other sources or Websites and can focus on class content or on student interests, depending on instructional purposes.

Anybody with access to the Internet can read blog entries and leave comments on what they have read. Attracted by these interactive and public aspects of blogs, teachers worldwide have been exploring the potential of this tool as a learning environment. Most platforms also offer the possibility of uploading PowerPoint presentations, photos and slide shows, audio and video resources, which makes blogs even more attractive.

In terms of authorship, Campbell (2003) presents three different types of blogs that fit pedagogical purposes: the tutor blog, run by the class teacher; the learner blog, run by each student in the group individually; and the class blog, run by teacher and students collaboratively.

1 The tutor blog

The tutor blog can perform three functions. First, as a space where learners and parents find information about course syllabus, homework assignments, assessment, due dates and so on (Stanley, 2005, n.p.; McDowell, 2004, n.p.). Second, as a portal to help students explore the resources available from the Web in a guided manner. For example, the teacher searches the Web and decides which texts and exercises are suitable for a particular group. Next, these materials are hyperlinked to the blog entry. This represents an advantage as these can be accessed any time, even after the course is finished. Moreover, according to Campbell (2003), on the side bar 'permanent links can be set-up and organized to aid the learner in self-study, for example links to online quizzes, English news sites, key-pal networks, audio and video files for listening practice and ESL interactive Websites' (n.p.).

In this sense, the tutor blog resembles a personal library where one can find reference books, extra-curricular and leisure activities which cater for the

group's special needs and interests. This use of the blog may foster learner autonomy and encourage them to go further on their studies.

The third possibility is to use the blog to give voice to one's feelings and thoughts. However, the language teacher may wish to provide the students with a learning experience while doing so. For example, he/she may decide to write about issues which are appealing and call forth a response, and still make sure that newly learnt vocabulary/structures are recycled, or new words linked to their definitions on other sites. This approach gives students extra opportunities to be in touch with casual, natural writing styles; to practice their writing skills while expressing themselves; and to establish a stronger affective bond with the teacher.

However, the tutor blog usually restricts students to writing comments on the subject the teacher has posted. Therefore, if the reason for having a blog is to foster the creation of spaces which individuals can manage the way they feel like, the learner blog is a better option.

2 The learner blog

According to (Campbell, 2003), the learner blog can be described as an 'online journal that an individual can continuously update with his or her own words, ideas, and thoughts' (n.p.). This kind of blog may therefore be best suited for reading and writing classes, as the learners are encouraged to write frequently about what interests them, and can post comments on other students' blogs as well. Moreover, having the learners' written work made public gives them a real audience and a stronger purpose to write. As a result, according to Stanley (2005, n.p.) students are usually more concerned about getting things right and usually understand the value of rewriting their texts. As the blog offers the opportunity to archive the posts, it can also serve as an online portfolio which enables the student to return to previous written work, for example, and evaluate the progress made during a writing course.

As regards the social aspect of the learning experience, learner blogs allow students to have their own personal online space, giving them the chance to find 'the appropriate sites to which links can be made. This will empower them to direct the reader to sites of choice for further reading' (Campbell, 2003, n.p.). Above all, students feel freer to get writing practice, as teachers usually let them write about issues that interest them, develop a sense of ownership and get experience with the practical, legal, and ethical issues of creating a hypertext document. Bartlett-Bragg (2003, n.p.) complements Campbell's view stating that 'the content becomes the sole responsibility of the author. Their objectivity regarding what to write and how to engage their readers is entirely in their control'. Consequently, this experience may 'provide the potential for alternative expression and a pathway for reflection leading to deep learning' (Bartlett-Bragg, 2003, n.p.).

Although Stanley (2005, n.p.) claims that the learner blog is the most rewarding type, teachers may find it difficult to cope with the extra workload

as these require more teacher time and effort both to set up and to moderate. Therefore, teachers may decide on a class blog instead.

3 The class blog

The class blog is a joint effort between students and teacher., It may therefore be seen as a way to foster a feeling of community between the members of a class (Campbell, 2003; McDowell, 2004; Stanley 2005). This is especially true if learners are involved and sharing information about themselves and their interests, as well as responding to what others are writing.

To Stanley (2005, n.p.), this kind of blog is best used as a collaborative discussion space, an extra-curricular extension of the classroom, encouraging students to reflect more in depth, in writing, on the themes touched upon in class. This can be done at home, by asking students to perform a given writing task, or collaboratively in a computer room, by pairing students off and asking them to carry out the tasks. These may vary in nature and will depend on the reasons for having the class blog. For example, according to Bella (2005) and to McDowell (2004) class blogs can be used as discussion boards. If a discussion ends due to time, the students who have not had the chance to contribute or who are reticent to participate can join in on the conversation in the blog by writing comments or replying to existing ones. Besides, as Campbell (2003, n.p.) notes that messages, images, and links related to classroom discussion topics and thoughts on a common theme assigned for homework can be posted by learners at their own discretion.

Campbell (2003, n.p.) also mentions that the class blog may be useful for facilitating project-based language learning. To the author, 'learners can be given the opportunity to develop research and writing skills by being asked to create an online resource for others'. Moreover, they can work together to produce and edit collaborative texts, since all the members of a class blog are given permission to write and manage posts. That is, anyone can edit the posts published by anyone else in the group. This makes room for peer correction and feedback, which are highly important in the development of critical reading and writing skills.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of using blogs in the language class is that the Internet makes it possible to have several groups of learners interacting all over the world. Therefore, the walls of the classroom tumble down and the world becomes a virtual room, where a student in Brazil, for example, can interact with a student in Japan in real time, if they wish. In this interaction, they can not only practice their foreign language skills but also, and most importantly, share cultural knowledge, feelings and thoughts. The learning experience becomes more fun and concrete as it involves an authentic use of the target language for real communication.

Having analysed the different types of blogs for learning contexts, I decided to create a class blog for my group of nine 14–15-year-old pre-intermediate students in the language school where I taught general English, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

II Creating our class blog, and my initial puzzles

Throughout one 15-week term, my students and I experimented with this virtual space which was new to us all. First, I decided on a platform which seemed simple to use.¹ In class, I proposed the creation of the blog and the students readily accepted the idea. We created a name for our blog² (action 6, the name of their course book) and collaboratively wrote a welcome message to our future visitors, as illustrated below:

Welcome to our blog. We are students of English in Brazil and in our blog you can play games, watch videos, listen to music and check what we are learning.

Have fun!

(Action 6)

We also took pictures and created a slide show to embed in the blog. At home, I sent my students an email inviting them to be members of the blog so that anybody could post their own texts and embed materials. My aim was to foster student autonomy and independence. Ideally, I expected my students would feel like uploading songs and including hyperlinks to games they enjoyed as well as publishing their written assignments. Our first assignment was based on a lesson about mini sagas and our second one was a recipe. To my disappointment, only half of the students turned in the assignments: a common problem in the institution I worked for. These were paper compositions which I checked and asked students to post. As a kick-off, I typed two of them onto our blog: a recipe and a mini saga.

To make our blog public, I sent the Webheads an email informing them about our page. My aim was to have those teachers tell their students about my class blog so that their students could interact with mine. The first visitors were teachers in Argentina, Portugal, the USA and Venezuela, who commented on the posts. My students were thrilled when they realized they had real English speakers reading their texts. As a follow-up activity, I asked them to reply to the comments at home and to prepare a short biodata text to add to the blog.

Some weeks went by but the students did not seem to have replied to the comments and only two of them had posted their biodata. Besides, only one student had become a member of the blog. The others reported having problems with passwords or not receiving my invitation email, problems I tried to solve before or after class time. At this point, I started to wonder why they always asked me to open the blog in class and allow them some time to check the new posts/comments. It seemed they looked forward to receiving

messages and to commenting orally on what had been posted, but would not write replies at home or join in the blog as members. Besides, I also noticed that the ones to leave comments were mostly teachers, not language students. This situation triggered my desire to understand my own students' views on the use of our blog as a language learning tool and to know how other students worldwide were reacting to the use of blogs.

This understanding seemed important to me because, as stated by Allwright (1996, p. 2), 'without some understanding of why things happen in a certain way in the classroom, teachers have no sound basis for deciding to repeat the idea, to adapt it, or to abandon it'.

Therefore, I needed to know why they were so motivated to read the blog in class but gave little attention to it at home. Did my students see the blog as a learning tool? If so, why did they not use it more often? Why did they not reply to the posts? Was this behaviour peculiar to my students or was this also happening in other contexts? These were issues I needed to understand better before assessing the success or failure of our class blog experience.

III Exploring my students' views on our class blogs – Phase I

According to Allwright (1996, p. 1) 'teachers should aim at developing an understanding of what is happening in the classroom without implementing activities which, in the end, will get in the way of teaching'. He therefore suggests the use of a form of practitioner research known as Exploratory Practice (Allwright, 2003), which is based on the principle that teachers can collect information about a topic they wish to investigate while students are actively involved in a language learning activity. This can be achieved by designing Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAs). Allwright and Hanks (2000, n.p.) say that we should identify the sort of activities which might be useful for data collection purposes without losing their value as learning activities. Teachers can, therefore, plan discussions, role-plays, reading and writing activities and so on to encourage students to use the target language while they focus their attention on the issue the teacher and/or the learners wish to understand more deeply.

I wanted to know if my students saw the blog as a learning tool that enabled them to get in touch with students from other contexts and that fostered the use of written language to express themselves. In fact, more than a month had gone by and they had not been as active as I had expected. Most of the class was behind schedule as regards posting the checked texts in the class blog and nobody had uploaded anything extra: no links, no videos, no songs, even though I had uploaded a video recipe for Easter. At this point, they had been asked to write their third assignment, an individual post about a trip they had enjoyed. Four of them had not posted anything yet, but three students had written texts and uploaded some pictures of the places they had visited and two had prepared PowerPoint slides, which I uploaded to the blog.

As I believed it was time we reflected upon our work so far, I designed my first PEPA as a class discussion focusing on three questions:

1. Why do we have a blog?
2. Does it help you to improve your English?
3. How motivated are you with the blog?

At the beginning of the class, I told my students I wished to know their views on our blog and proposed we held a discussion. I wrote my questions on the board and gave my students some minutes to jot down their ideas. Next, I asked them to get into four pairs (one student missed this class) and share their answers with their partners. Finally, I opened up the discussion and took notes on what they said. At the end of the activity, I collected all their written notes to read at home.

I learned that all the students understood we had a blog to practice English and to interact with other speakers. My students also indicated that the blog was, indeed, a learning tool for them, as the following quotes show:

Student 1: 'it helps our English with new words and new expressions'.

Student 2: 'it encourages to the people speak in English so much'.

Student 3: 'it encourages us to search about things and to write more in English'.

Student 4: 'I think blogs help people with your [*sic*] English'.

Student 5: 'I think blogs help because we can talk with another [*sic*] people in the world'.

Student 6: 'I read all in English'.

Student 8: 'it is an interactive way to learn', 'we talk to people all over the world'.

Student 9: 'It is in English'.

However, none of them were highly motivated or active, either because of their lack of free time to visit the blog at home (six students) or due to technical problems they had faced in becoming members and posting messages. This issue was raised by four of my students (one gave both reasons). During our discussion, I learned that, in fact, most of them preferred to send their materials to me via email so that I could do the posting. That was not what I had in mind in setting up the blog. I had wanted them to work independently from me but this had not happened.

In the meantime, the more class blogs I visited, the more puzzled I was by the fact that, regardless of the country, a tendency seemed to emerge. Despite the high statistics registered in the visit counts, I noticed a low number of replies to the posts, something which mirrored my own situation.³

I therefore prepared an online survey⁴ containing 10 questions. Questions 1–3 focused on general information about the educational context and its participants. Questions 4–5 referred to the respondent's experience with blogs. Questions 6–7 asked about blogs as course requirements. Question 8, which

was subdivide into 18 items, and question 9, which contained 8 items, focused on teacher and student practices and attitudes towards blogging. Question 10 required respondents to comment on statement A, one of my puzzles (A – My students like to open blogs in class. However, they do not feel like making comments/replying to comments) and on statement B, which reflects something I had observed in my own blog when I asked students to post their travel logs. (B – They tend to copy information from the Web instead of writing their own material, even if I give them a model to follow.)

This survey was answered by members of the Webheads community of practice and raised interesting points for reflection.

IV Listening to other practitioners' views on blogs in education

The survey was responded to by 16 (and fully completed by 12) practitioners from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Portugal, Sudan, Taiwan, Ukraine and the USA.⁵ Since professionals tend to work in more than one context and to teach different age groups/levels, the number of answers, in most cases, is higher than the number of respondents.

About their teaching contexts, I collected 18 answers. The majority (eight respondents) taught ESL at university/college level, two in a language institute, three in a primary/secondary school, two taught private students, two taught English as mother tongue and one taught vocational studies. This information matches the higher number of respondents (13) working with 16+ students whose level of proficiency goes from pre-intermediate to advanced.

It is interesting that only the vocational studies teacher uses a blog with basic students and only the Portuguese teacher has tried to use blogs with 6–10 year olds. This may indicate a preference, at least among the participants of this survey, to involve older, more mature and independent learners, both in terms of cognitive development and linguistic proficiency in the target language, in the blogging activity.

Thirteen people worked with blogs for personal reasons, just like me. This suggests that blogging in education is still an individual enterprise born out of one's interest in new technology applied to education rather than institutionalized practices. This view is also supported by the fact that only seven respondents claimed their blogs were part of their course requirements, which means blogging was not otherwise mandatory. The same was true of my context. Where it was not mandatory, five participants said that students were somehow rewarded for taking part in the blog. This suggests that practitioners felt the need to encourage the students to make spontaneous use of the tool by offering some kind of concrete incentive, like, as in my context, the opportunity to get extra marks for course involvement and participation.

The questions about practitioners' behaviour and attitudes towards their blogs were also revealing. Five respondents reported that they 'aways'/'sometimes'

posted all their students' materials whereas seven 'not often'/'never' did that. Half of them said posting was 'not often' done during class time, which is in accordance with data indicating that nine of the respondents 'always'/'sometimes' set blogging as homework and 11 stated that students worked with their blogs from home. This information matches what I tried to do in my context as well. However, I made a point of opening the blogs during class time, to show my students the progress we had been making and I also (in response to the technical and time problems revealed by PEPA 1) prepared activities in which posting was done during class time. On the choice of blog topics, 11 respondents said their learners were 'always'/'sometimes' allowed to decide on what to post. Seven of them also said that only 'sometimes' this decision did not include student's participation. This freedom given to learners may indicate that practitioners see the blog as a medium of self expression. However, it may sometimes be necessary to guide learners about what to publish. In my case, for example, we decided on the very first class what content our blog would have. However, the few posts I had which were not related to homework assignments were simple notes published by a student who liked to use the blog to say hello to me, thus establishing a presence on line.

About the procedures to publish student's work, nine respondents said they 'not often'/'never' followed the traditional method of collecting students' work on paper, checking it and then having the fair copy/rewriting made public. Only three professionals said they 'sometimes' followed this procedure. This information leads us to wonder how linguistic accuracy is being treated by those who use blogs in the language learning context. My respondents seem to share different views on this issue. Six of them 'sometimes' corrected students' mistakes while another six 'not often'/'never' did. This choice may be linked to practitioners' preference for peer feedback as two of them 'always' encouraged it, and four did that 'sometimes'. However, five respondents 'never' encouraged peer correction.

About students' worries concerning the language they used in their posts, an American respondent added in question 10 the following comment: 'Many of my students are willing to make short, quick, comments but are not as interested in making longer comments or in editing and proofreading their posts' (Respondent 6, USA, University level L1). This shows that, at least in this professional's context, the students' main concern is getting their messages across. Therefore, contrary to the old belief that the language teacher should be a judge of their students' linguistic accuracy, crossing out all mistakes and providing the correct form, it seems that the most important thing for those who include blogging activities in their curriculum is to offer students an opportunity to express themselves and to communicate with real readers. For myself, I must confess I was worried about accuracy and made a point of correcting students' mistakes either before or after the text had been published. I guess this was also the concern of the Portuguese teacher who

answered this survey, as illustrated in this excerpt from her answer to question 10. 'Due to my students' limited knowledge of English, I just have them make comments in the extracurricular blog. But when in our curricular blog we're working with, they work in 'Edit mode' and post some of their materials' (Respondent 14, Portugal, Primary–Secondary school). Although none of my survey questions addressed directly the importance given to the linguistic accuracy of texts to be published online, I believe this concern may be present at some other moments of the learning process. Therefore, this is an issue which I believe deserves further investigation.

In terms of social interaction, it is also worth noticing that eight respondents claimed to interact with other bloggers outside their country while eight said they 'not often'/'never' interacted with other bloggers in the same educational context. This may mean that those working with blogs are minorities in their institutions, which makes it hard for them to find partners to develop blogging activities together. This held true in my own research context: I was the only one in a group of 16 teachers to use blogs with my classes. Consequently, it was easier for me to make contact with teachers worldwide than with teachers in my own institution.

About writing in the blog, all the respondents said they commented on their students' posts: eight 'always' did it whereas four did that 'sometimes'. However, only one respondent said that 'all' students wrote posts. The majority (five respondents) said that 'most' of their students wrote posts while four observed that just 'some of them'/'not many of them' contributed to the blog.

This variation in the frequency in writing posts may bear some relation to the fact that blogging, as my data revealed, seems to be taken as part of the learning experience in three different ways, as exemplified in these excerpts taken from question 10.

- a) As an optional activity, as stated by this Brazilian teacher:

Blogging is 100% optional in our case, and students never feel like they have to make comments or write posts (although they are certainly encouraged to do so). (Respondent 11, Brazil, Private classes)

- b) Done at teacher's discretion, as in this comment made by an America professor:

My most recent class would only post when required to do so and given time in class. If I required comments, they commented (with rare exceptions). (Respondent 10, USA, University level L2)

- c) As part of the course requirement, as illustrated in these excerpts, one from Chile and one not identified:

Well, we have a class blog and my students only leave comments. They have to make comments because it is a requirement of the course. They mostly ask questions on the

blog. (Respondent 16, Chile, University level L2)

Blogging is offered as a substitute for traditional assignments, and commenting/replying to comments is part of those assignments Blogging just makes it easier! (Respondent 9, not identified)

These various views on blogging may also have an influence on the number of students commenting on other students' posts, which is not as high as the teachers'. Five respondents observed that 'most' of the learners left comments, two observed 'some' of them did and four said 'not many' did. One claimed that 'none' of their students left comments.

I could now understand that perhaps I should not worry so much about the fact that my students were more interested in reading the posts than in commenting on what they had read as this seemed to be occurring in other contexts as well.

Another fact worth commenting on is that only a minority (three respondents) said 'all of'/'most of' their students visited their blog at least once a week. Visits to other students' blogs were even less frequent as only one respondent observed that 'most' of their learners engaged in this activity. In my context, this behaviour was attributed to my students' lack of time and technical problems, as revealed in my PEPA 1: a context shared by the Ukrainian professor who answered this survey: 'My students are of low level. English is offered to learn only once a week by the university program. So, they don't have much time to blog' (Respondent 7, Ukraine, University level L2).

However, this does not seem to be the situation faced by most of the learners in the survey. Seven respondents claimed that 'not many'/'none' of the learners complained about lack of time for blogging and six reported that 'not many'/'none' of the learners had had technical problems. In fact, only three teachers ticked the *most of them* option for 'lack of time' and nobody ticked this one for 'technical problems'. It is clear that the reasons why students in the surveyed contexts do not blog so often are not the same as the ones I have encountered in my context. This is another issue deserving further investigation.

I decided to design a second PEPA to check if my students would enjoy working with the blog more actively, that is writing posts and replies during class time.

V Exploring my students' views on our class blogs – Phase II

My second PEPA consisted in two different tasks: a set of activities carried out in our multimedia centre (task 1) and a classroom discussion (task 2).

Task 1 gave learners the opportunity to work in trios in the computer laboratory to fulfill activities related a) to their blog, b) to a class blog I had created with another pre-intermediate teen group I taught in the same institution and c) to an external blog of their choice.

At the beginning of the class I told my students we would spend half that day's class time working on blogs in the computer room, an idea they really seemed to enjoy. In the laboratory, I told them to sit in trios and we went over the following instructions.

Task 1: Activity in the computer laboratory

1. Visit our blog at <http://action6.com.motime.com>.
 - (a) Is there a post for you? Reply to it.
 - (b) Read your friends' travel logs. Which one do you like best? Reply to it.
2. Do you like celebrities and music? Visit <http://ouridols.motime.com>, my Basic 5 blog.
 - (a) Choose one artist you like. Read the post and write a comment on it in pairs.
3. Visit one of the other blogs on the sidebar. What do you think of it? Would you like to leave a comment there? Why/why not?

My intention was to provide them with some guidance about what to do in the blogs and to help them resolve any doubts they might have concerning how to do things. Besides, as they had reported having little time for blogging at home, this could be an opportunity to involve those students who had contributed the least due to time/technical constraints. Therefore, I decided to start by asking them to go over the posts in their own blog first, then to move on to the *our idols* blog, whose members my students already knew in person as they shared the same educational and social background. Finally, I wished to encourage them to spend some time exploring at least one of the blogs on the side bar, whose managers were ESL teachers from the Webheads community that had previously visited our blog. I hoped this last task would arouse their curiosity and lead them to contact students from other countries.

While they were busy doing the activities, I walked around monitoring their engagement, which was higher in the first two activities proposed. The students kept their focus on the task and three of them even resorted to the language dictionary hyperlink available from our blog while they produced their texts collaboratively. It is interesting, though, that at the same time as they were working together, each student also wanted to write their own post in order to establish a presence in the blog. As this writing was done in collaboration, there were also instances of peer feedback and peer correction during text production, which, according to Villamil and Guerrero (1996), are highly important in the development of writing skills. Besides, some of the students interacted with other peers during Activity 2 by making oral comments about the posts they were reading and even suggested replying to the same posts as their trios. This shows that the task prompted a lot more interaction than I had planned.

Another aspect refers to the visits they paid to the blogs on the side bar. I saw that the drive to read and reply to the posts was lower than in the first two

activities. While visiting the blogs, they seemed to be paying more attention to the pages as a whole than focusing on the messages there. For example, a student commented on the clock in Blog A whereas another trio paid attention to the dancing letters in Blog B and followed the hyperlink. While monitoring, I also observed that the students in general did not feel like leaving comments and only did that because I asked them to. This lower enthusiasm to work with extra blogs also reminded me of the online survey which revealed that 50% of the respondents stated that not many of their students visited other students' blogs very often. This negative attitude was made clear to me during our class discussion.

Back in the classroom I suggested Task 2, a reflection activity, first in trios, then with the whole class, based on the following questions.

Task 2: Let's reflect about this activity!

1. What's your opinion about this activity?
2. Did you prefer to visit our blog or the other groups' blogs?
3. If you had time during our lessons, would you like to do it again?
4. Do you feel more motivated to work with blogs at home?

As for PEPA1, I reminded students to make some notes individually before starting the trio discussions. Next, as a big group they reported orally their feelings towards the activities we had just carried out. In proposing this reflexive session, I wished to gain deeper understanding of their views on blogging and to test my initial thought that if I allowed them some room to work on their page during class time, they would probably become more interested in at least trying to work on it from home. Perhaps, in the future they could even see this as a spare time activity and not school work.

As regards the computer room activities, all my students enjoyed them, qualifying them as 'nice', 'cool', 'interesting', 'interactive' and 'good'.

About their preferences, there were different views inside the trios. According to the discussion we held and the notes I collected at the end of the class, it seems that most of them (five students) preferred to work with their own blog, mainly because they (three students) knew who they were writing to, because they (one student) thought their blog was the best one or because they (one student) could create their own posts. This might well be why they were more involved in the first two activities. In both cases, they knew who their audience was and this seems to have made a difference in terms of their willingness to read posts and write replies. Consequently, the types of comments made in each blog ranged from more personal, individual responses, such as in these travel log samples:

Student 6: Hi (student 3). I never went (sic) to the Bahamas or Miami but I think they are beautiful places.

Student 5: Hi (student 3). Your travel log is so interesting! Tell me more about it.

Student 7: Hi (student 5). I like your trip, your school trip and one day I will take this trip with my school, too.

Student 3: Student 7. It seems to be a really nice place! I love to travel with my family and taste different types of food in the places I visit.

Student 8: Hi, my friend! It's very cool to go to the zoo, you learn more about the animals. I've been there sometimes.

Student 9: Hello (student 3). Your travel log is the second best because my travel log is the first!

to more collective ones, such as these from the *our idols* blog:

Students 4, 5, 6: We also admire Justin Timberlake because he dances very well and his songs are nice.

Students 2, 7: We like her (Gisele Bundchen) so much. She is 27 years old but she looks younger. We think she is the most beautiful model in the world.

Student 1, 8: 50 Cent is one of the best singers for us.

Student 3: U2 is one of my favourite bands too and I really like them because, as you said, they're not a selfish and rich band and they are interested in social problems and because they use their music and the money they win with it to help people all over the world.

Student 9: I like Hillary Duff because she sings very well, she is beautiful and loves her fans.

These responses still reveal something about the writers' likes and dislikes, but it is also noticeable that most students preferred to write shared comments. Just two of them wrote individual replies.

In turn, the types of comments made in extra blogs are just a few simple general statements, as in these extracts.⁶

Student 7: 'I liked the blog.'

Student 2: 'I loved the dancing letters.'

Students 1, 9: 'The song is very cool.'

Student 8: 'I liked the clock.'

The most thoughtful comment was by student 3, who encouraged the bloggers to 'Keep on studying English because it is important to learn other languages'.

This reluctance to work with people they do not know is an issue which was not thoroughly discussed by the group, and which they were unable to explain.. However, two students said they preferred to visit the other blogs exactly because they like 'to learn new things about other people' (student 9) and 'to discover secrets' (student 6), although the latter left no comment in the blog visited. Besides, two students revealed they enjoyed visiting both theirs and others' blogs because they were equally interesting.

Despite the general preference for their own blog, I suggest it is worth introducing the idea of working with other bloggers as people are different

and may react in various ways as regards contacting strangers. Perhaps when these students are more familiar with blogging and have a higher level of proficiency in the language they will find it easier to communicate with foreigners. This is an issue which is open to investigation.

As regards questions 3 and 4, all students said they would like to have this type of activity as part of our lessons. They even suggested advertising their blog to other classes at my branch as well⁷ and stated that they were more motivated to use our blogs at home. Although I did not inquire about the reasons why they felt more motivated, I guess the interaction that took place during the activity could have been a strong motivational factor to make them see working on the blog as fun. This is another issue worth exploring.

VI From puzzlement to understanding

By applying Exploratory Practice to my educational context, I came to understand several things about using blogs with my EFL students, and discovered many other puzzles which I will unfortunately not be able to explore in this specific teaching context. However, this experience has definitely widened my horizons on this subject. I now understand, for example, that it was naive to believe that just because my students were computer-literate, they would be able to learn how to work with the platform quickly. To soften the negative impact technical problems may have had on my students' willingness to work with the blog, I could have given them a tutorial on the basic operations. Although I explained how to do these things, I could have given hands-on experience in our computer laboratory, for example.

In addition, I lacked the knowledge and experience to choose the right platform for our needs. Even though I created blogs in three different platforms to check if they were attractive and user-friendly, I did not know that the one I chose offered limited free storage of resources uploaded (such as pictures and audio files) and that that same storage was to be used for all the blogs opened in one account. I had two blogs in the same account and to upload new files I deleted old ones without knowing that if an album is cleaned, for example, the photos in the blog disappear. Unfortunately, a lot of students' pictures were lost in this process and were unrecoverable. I would now recommend having some trial blogs before you decide on 'the real thing' with your students, checking if the platform chosen caters for all your wants and needs.

This need to be aware of what blogging and technology is all about was also raised by one of the online survey respondents. He reminds us that students' level of expertise, interest in technology and understanding of what an educational blog is may vary greatly:

Many of my students are familiar with MySpace and FaceBook and think that edublogs and multicultural blogs are the same thing. They're not, of course...Some are very comfortable with using computers. Most are fairly comfortable and interested in learning new things. Some are rather computer-phobic and make it necessary, in the beginning, to

do a lot of 'hand holding' and guiding them through things step by step, and sometimes the first steps – like logging in and remembering their password – have to be repeated many times. (Respondent 6, USA, University level L1)

Upon exploring my practice I learned that teachers should be ready to account for that diversity and accept the fact that blogging is a new reality in practically all classrooms worldwide. Some people are more experienced, others less, but we can always learn by sharing, with our students, fellow teachers, or by joining online communities of practice such as the Webheads.

About my puzzles, I realized that there was no strict relationship between the amount of posting done and the value my students gave to the blog. In fact, it was the theme of our end-of-term exhibition, where they had the opportunity to show and tell the audience all they had done in the blog during the semester. Factors such as lack of time or technical problems should be taken into account when assessing the validity of using blogs for educational purposes. This was revealed during PEPA 1 and helped me to become more certain that my students were working on something they enjoyed. The fact that they liked to work with the blog in class, revealed in PEPA 2, also helped me to see that perhaps my students would profit from investing more class time in this kind of activity.

To conclude, the online survey helped me see that other practitioners all over the world are trying to find a way to insert blogs in their educational contexts just like me.

VII Final words

Language teachers around the world have been using blogs for educational purposes due to their potential to create interaction and to foster collaborative learning among students from diverse backgrounds.

However, as the use of this tool is recently new, I had many puzzles in regard to what extent the time and effort we all put into the creation and maintenance of blogs is worth it. I decided to work with my learners towards an understanding of the real value blogs have in the teaching and learning process. Since 'we should make our work for understanding part of our pedagogy, not an addition to it' (Allwright & Hanks, 2001, n.p.), Exploratory Practice seemed to offer the means to investigate this issue without the need to interfere with my students' learning process. Consequently, the best thing about this process of data collection was that we were able to work these puzzles out while we used the target language in meaningful learning activities.

Above all, this experience has opened my eyes to other questions worth thinking about and has even led me to create a personal blog in which I have started a fresh discussion on this issue with other language teachers.⁸

The understanding my students and I have gained from this experience will certainly pave our ways for new incursions in the world of blogs in education,

for I am already planning to use this asset in my current teaching context and my former students will certainly have other opportunities to work with blogs as this technology is here to stay.

Notes

- 1 There are many platforms such as blogger.com; wordpress.com; sampasites.com, to name a few.
- 2 [http:// Action6.motime.com](http://Action6.motime.com)
- 3 By the time I finished this article, our blog had already had over 1,400 visits.
- 4 http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=RymtMnugwytiSQAB1_2b72rA_3d_3d
- 5 I wish to thank all practitioners who kindly answered this survey.
- 6 Students 4, 5, 6 left no comments at all.
- 7 I proposed the same activity to my Basic 5 group, so the action6 blog was visited by other students.
- 8 <http://dorissoares.wordpress.com>

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